

Sunday, August 30, 2015
C-II: The Real Story

Yes, the world of humans came very close to ending in October, 1962. Closer than anyone in high office in the US imagined at the time, or for some forty years afterwards.

At a certain time on Saturday, October 27, for someone with a preternatural knowledge of all the relevant facts and mind-sets—aware of conditions within a certain Soviet submarine in the Caribbean suffering what it thought was a destroyer attack—the odds in favor of a full-scale exchange of US and Soviet nuclear weapons within hours that would destroy civilization might reasonably have been very high.

And yet: with comparable knowledge in retrospect, some of the risks that close observers inferred at the time or later were not based on realities. For example, contrary to appearances as assessed by serious observers such as Bertrand Russell or the analyst Barton Bernstein, neither the American president nor the Soviet premier were men willing to pursue a course of action that they themselves saw as presenting a high, or even significant, risk of thermonuclear war.

In particular, President Kennedy was not undertaking warlike preparations and actions in face of what he has often been misquoted as perceiving as a “one third to one half probability” of nuclear war: he would not remotely have considered doing that. (Even so, his actual, very much lower expectation of war underestimated the dangers the world was running on Saturday, reflecting his ignorance of crucial factors and happenings.)

Nor was Khrushchev, impulsive and bold as he was in general, reckless or heedless of consequences during the crisis. On the contrary, from the moment that Kennedy announced his awareness of the missile deployment and his determination to see them removed (Monday night, October 22) Khrushchev was cautious to a degree that virtually no one civilians in the ExComm of the NSC envisioned, secretly prepared to concede—though still haggling on the terms—no later than Wednesday, the 24th (8th day of the famous 13 days). And really, I will argue, so was Kennedy, secretly.

In fact, I believe that each leader was—contrary to his public declarations, and in Kennedy’s case, secretly from almost all his advisers—was *determined*, to the extent that he had control over events, not to go to war, not to permit armed conflict to arise between American and Soviet forces under any circumstances. I believe that each of them, from a very early stage in the public confrontation (and earlier, for Kennedy), to end the crisis *on the other’s terms, if necessary*, rather than let events escalate to actual combat.

Well, then: no risk, or negligible risk of war after all, right? No. Far from it. Neither leader was, in fact, in total control of all the forces confronting the other that might trigger war, and by Saturday control was rapidly slipping away from each of them.

Khrushchev saw this sooner and more compellingly, even, than Kennedy, which is why Khrushchev was compelled suddenly to quit bargaining and to accept Kennedy's latest terms. He knew dangers in the situation that Kennedy did not, because Khrushchev had chosen not to tell him: with the result that he had no choice but to lose the contest.

If Khrushchev had made certain other choices that would seem natural, virtually compelling (his failure to do this still seems inexplicable to me) he could almost surely have "won," without war. And if he could have afforded to delay his concessions even six to twelve more hours (which Kennedy's 48-hour ultimatum on Saturday night—a bluff, I believe-- allowed him), I think Kennedy would instead have conceded on Khrushchev's terms, accepting serious political repercussions in America.

Thus the crisis could have ended without war in a very different way than it did. Neither possible outcome, I believe, was unacceptable to either leader. It was not merely that neither wanted war: no civilian official on either side did. (In contrast, the military on both sides were prepared for it, and even expected it; and the American JCS wanted it, in Cuba at least.) Rather, I repeat that each of the top leaders, privately I feel sure, was *determined* to avoid either initiating combat or provoking the other to do so, even if that required accepting the outcome the other preferred or demanded. (If I'm right, that readiness had to be kept tightly secret from his military and even most of his civilian officials, as well as the American public).

And yet: each was directing his military to carry on provocative activities—making the missiles operational on a crash basis in Cuba and submarine patrols in the Caribbean on the Soviet side, pursuing all preparations for invasion of Cuba and pressing aggressive, low-level aerial reconnaissance over Cuba while harassing Soviet submarines, on the American—prolonging the crisis day by day while each haggled over the resolution of the conflict, hoping for better terms than he was prepared, in the end, to accept.

War, armed conflict in the Caribbean or in Europe, all-out war that Kennedy understood would annihilate the population of Eurasia if not all Americans (and in reality, would have caused near-extinction of humanity) was not just a possibility during this haggling, as each warned the other. It was a very high likelihood after five days of this.

Had not Khrushchev—to the surprise and perplexity of the Americans--suddenly initiated an abrupt, humiliating withdrawal of his missiles Sunday morning (without even waiting for an official acknowledgement and response to his proposal of Saturday morning, which Kennedy had argued to his advisers was "very reasonable") there was every likelihood of the fuse to all-out war being lit by that afternoon.ⁱ

ⁱ The American Joint Chiefs of Staff would have been euphoric if that powder train

Better late than never, from his point of view, and far, far better in 1962 than in 1964, when hundreds of Soviet ICBMs would at last be in silos. None of the other Chiefs were adamantly opposed to this course of events. They continued to urge an attack on Cuba—while some MRBMs were still operational (and unknown to them, hundreds of mobile tactical nuclear warheads were prepared to attack invaders)—over the next month, while Castro continued to urge attacks on American reconnaissance planes, which would have triggered the war the JCS wanted.

The Chiefs would have been surprised a few days later (with everyone else), as the smoke from hundreds of Soviet and European burning cities had been lofted into the stratosphere and blotted out most of the sunlight worldwide, especially as this went on for months—while all harvests failed and global supplies of food ran out, in America as well, starving humanity to near-extinction—and persisted for a decade or more, long after civilization had ceased to exist.

LeMay had not calculated on this. Nobody's perfect.

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C-II: The Real Story, II

[Other ways in which the risks were *less*, in retrospect, than they seemed at the time, or later, to many.]

The chance of Khrushchev being provoked by American moves—such as the blockade, or by an air attack on Soviet-manned SAMs or MRBMs, or even by a full American invasion of Cuba (such as the JCS prepared for and urged) against 40,000 Soviet troops (estimated to be no more than 14,000 by US intelligence at the height of the crisis)—to order either the use of tactical nuclear weapons (unknown to be present by the Americans) against an invasion force, launching of MRBMs, or initiation of strategic nuclear attacks against the US or Europe, were virtually zero.

This depended not only on Khrushchev's own extreme caution once the crisis erupted—unforeseen and not recognized at the time on the American side, let alone the world audience—but on a strategic balance well known to the Soviet leadership but still unappreciated by the world's publics (or even by Castro and Chinese leaders): an immense strategic American superiority, with perhaps forty (perhaps less) ICBMs in the SU against thousands of American warheads ranged against the SU. A first strike by the Soviets would be entirely suicidal for them, and Khrushchev knew it (and had not the slightest inclination to bring about a massive Masada or Jonestown for his country, under any circumstances whatever).

Although the image of Soviet nuclear superiority (raised by Sputnik and Khrushchev's boasts, and warnings by American military in 1958-61) had eroded since the Gilpatric speech one year earlier, few without American top secret clearances fully appreciated the extent of American numerical and operational superiority in 1961-62. Khrushchev was seen widely as impulsive and hot-tempered (the image of his pounding the table at the UN with his shoe was very vivid in people's minds), and the threatened American actions were understandably regarded as extraordinary provocative to a superpower, as indeed they would have been.

But the near-impossibility of provoking the Soviet leader into deliberately initiating nuclear war in 1962, either regionally or strategically, is clear from Soviet records and testimony available twenty to forty years later. (I wasn't wrong, in retrospect, in that estimate of the situation at the time, along with other insiders who knew the secret imbalance; and Khrushchev at no time from October 22 on is found in the records to have been unbalanced himself, lacking in self-control emotionally or in any way irrational: whatever one makes of his wishfulness up to that point. It) was my under-estimate of the possibility of loss of leadership control that was seriously mistaken at the time.)

Thus the panic of such sober observers as Bertrand Russell, and even a uniquely experienced scientist-activist like Leo Szilard (who with his wife fled during the

crisis to Switzerland to have a chance of influencing events after the war: not knowing of nuclear winter, and even, it would seem, surprisingly underestimating the effects of fallout on European neutrals) that all-out war by deliberate initiative of either leader was misplaced, however plausible. Russell made passionate private and public appeals to both leaders to back off immediately, placing somewhat greater trust in Khrushchev's response. They were, in fact, as I now see it, taking *unconscionable* risks in prolonging the crisis—and would have been well advised, in terms of the prospects of human survival, to follow Russell's urging earlier than either did—even though neither was willing to gamble as recklessly as Russell and many others supposed they were.

OK, then: both the capability of the Soviets to contemplate initiating nuclear war, and both Khrushchev's and Kennedy's willingness to undertake acts either saw as having a significant risk of nuclear war, or any war, was far lower than most realized at the time or much later, in fact, virtually zero.

Furthermore: Khrushchev's control of the Presidium, and of his armed forces, was effectively total. American fears during the crisis (after Khrushchev had decided not to challenge the blockade) that he might still yield to hawk-like pressures either from other Politburo members or his military, or that he might already have done so or even been displaced by a coup as of Saturday morning, Oct. 27 (when his latest message, demanding a Turkish trade, seemed to contradicted his conciliatory and, in the eyes of some, panicked message of Friday night) were unfounded.

As his son Sergei reports, he had at that time unchallenged authority in the Soviet power system and essentially made all decisions himself, without need to compromise with others or yield to pressures. And given his own cautious inclinations, that meant the risks within the crisis were less than they might have been. One might even say, much less than if the influence of his military and potential opposition within his own advisers or his political environment had been comparable to what Kennedy faced in America. (If Kennedy had yielded, against his own personal inclinations, to the advice he was getting from most of his own civilian officials, let alone from General LeMay and the other Chiefs, we would not be here to read this).

Finally, although the Joint Chiefs and others in the military were not just disapproving of many of the president's decisions during the crisis, they were outraged and intensely frustrated, they remained essentially disciplined in carrying out his orders, despite their recurrent warnings and protests. Some actions were taken on their initiative that were potentially dangerous, but these were all within their prerogatives given his orders, none deliberately violated his orders. And although even Kennedy and others had to wonder whether the penetration of a SAC U-2 into Soviet airspace at the very height of the crisis had really been "accidental" or a SAC provocation, it was in fact unauthorized and inadvertent. The "lesson" some drew afterwards that the military had been out of control at high levels was

misplaced (though their professional judgments and advice were potentially catastrophic).

Finally, it's my own judgment based on forty years' study of this confrontation—contrary to nearly universal opinion of American insiders, observers and even scholars then and later-- that Khrushchev's own decision to deploy missiles, tactical nuclear weapons and Soviet combat forces to Cuba secretly in 1962 (though unquestionably risky, as it appeared even to some close colleagues of Khrushchev at the time, including Mikoyan and Gromyko) did *not* reveal that one of the superpowers was in 1962 under the control of a leader more reckless, fundamentally unpredictable, let alone "mad," than American officials during the Cold War.

(That particular standard, that comparison, is a considered one. The policies and practices *were* mad, I believe, in an important and fundamental sense, but that was true on both sides, and by standards that were not apparent to almost anyone at the time.)

Khrushchev was responding to a secret American threat against Cuba (unknown to me or almost any Americans, even to many on the ExComm, at the time) *quite comparable to the public threat by the Soviets to West Berlin in 1958-62*. And he was attempting to protect Cuba from American occupation in 1962 in *virtually identical fashion* to the way Americans proposed and prepared to protect West Berlin from East German or Soviet occupation from 1948 to 1971.

Each superpower, as of 1962, was attempting to hold on to a friendly, small enclave deep within the other's sphere of overwhelming conventional military power, by threats and preparations to initiate nuclear war against conventional attack.

That was a threat, in each case, to blow up the world, the world of cities and humans, if their enclave were incorporated into the political sphere of the other as a result of blockade or invasion.¹

¹ I would now call that mad, in each case. Not because it was necessarily or even likely to be ineffective. In fact, it "worked" in the case of Berlin over the seventy years of the Cold War; and it worked for the Soviets and Cuba in 1962, and arguably later. Not because the political stakes, the cost of "losing" their enclave, reasonably looked negligible or even small, in political/diplomatic terms.

But because however small the chance—it was never zero-- of failing to deter and of seeing the threat carried out, that was a gamble that no human leaders had remotely the right to impose on the people of the world and the survival of our species. To do so, as I now see it, was mad, and evil. But it was enacted for very ordinary political reasons, by very ordinary people.

Comparable policies with comparable potential consequences are being enacted by comparable officials, today. (I am speaking of current nuclear policies and posture in the US and Russia, and of a current confrontation between Russia and NATO over the future of Ukraine, which poses the short-run possibility of armed conflict by conventional but nuclear-armed troops of the US and Russia for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis over half a century ago .)